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ABSTRACT

In teaching introductory English as a second language to nonliterate adult refugees, the focus should initially be on oral skills. The literature on characteristics of recent Southeast Asian refugees and suggested curriculum strategies is reviewed in order to determine the appropriate curriculum and methods for this group. A curriculum for nonliterate refugees should separate speaking and listening skills from reading and writing skills. The naturalistic approach to language instruction should be combined with practice drills that cover a syllabus of important structures, patterns, and vocabulary. Introduction of oral and aural skills permits the student to develop verbal abilities unhindered by the slower development of literacy skills. (RW)

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INTRODUCTORY ENGLISH AS A SECOND LANGUAGE FOR NONLITERATE SOUTHEAST ASIAN REFUGEES

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Acquiring both a new language and literacy concepts is an overwhelming task for nonliterate adult refugees. These students need an opportunity to focus solely on oral skills without the distraction of the new symbols and concepts of reading and writing. The philosophical basis for this approach, as well as specific curriculum strategies are discussed.

Review of the Literature

Profile of recent refugees

Since 1975, large numbers of refugees have been arriving from Southeast Asia, beginning with 145,000 from Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos in 1975, followed by 80,000 more by the end of 1979 (Skinner and Hendricks, 1979). In June 1979, President Carter raised the Southeast Asian refugee quota to 168,000; this commitment was reaffirmed by Secretary of State Haig after President Reagan took office (Mitchell, 1981). The initial group of refugees included many well-educated city dwellers, mostly bureaucrats and their children, over half of whom spoke some English (Kelly, 1978; Skinner and Hendricks, 1979).

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The more recent arrivals, in contrast, were mostly from rural areas or fishing villages, many nonliterate, with no previous classroom experience (Seymour, 1980). This group includes the three major ethnic groups from Laos: Lao, Mien, and Hmong. Because the Mien and Hmong languages have only recently been written, these two cultures are basically preliterate. Each of these ethnic groups has its own religion, culture, and language, although many Mien and Hmong speak Lao in addition to their primary language (Ranard, Note 1; CAL, Note 2). Forty percent of the refugees are in California, a particularly large proportion of them Mien (Mitchell, 1981; CAL, Note 3).

The recent experiences of these people have contributed to the emergence of certain common characteristics which must be considered in the design of any educational program. The Mien and Hmong, especially, appear to be suffering from great cultural shock, depression, survivor guilt, and problems related to their having to violate their own cultural mores, as in leaving behind the graves of their ancestors (Seymour, 1980).

Also, like many other ethnic groups, some Southeast Asian adult refugees may be shy, ashamed, or embarrassed about their lack of classroom skills; this, too, may create special educational problems in the English as a Second Language (ESL) classroom. Even students literate in their own languages, but unfamiliar with the Latin alphabet or American educational styles, may evince these same behaviors, although for different reasons. Therefore, in the same class, students with varying degrees of literacy may benefit from the same curriculum and educational approach. These groups include:

Preliterate: Students who are unable to read or write their own language and who come from a culture in which literacy is rare or nonexistent.

Illiterate: Students who are not able to read or write their own language but who come from a culture where literacy is common.

Semiliterate: Students who are not able to read and write their own language above an elementary level.

Nonliterate: All of the above

(ACSA/ESL, 1981, Note 4).

A curriculum strategy for Southeast Asian refugees

The research in second language acquisition shows no clear indication of agreement about the processes of adult language

learning. Certainly, the conditions under which first and second languages are learned are not the same: the first language is learned in the home, perhaps at critical periods of development during which language acquisition is tied to physiological factors. Therefore, adult second language learning may differ in fundamental ways from first language acquisition (Brooks, 1977; Mace-Matluck, 1979; Seliger, 1978; Shapira, 1978).

Other research finds another tongue and second language learning for adults as well as children may follow similar processes; second language learning may be but an extension of primary skills (Ervin-Tripp, 1978; Krashen, 1978; McDonough and McDonough, 1978; Terrell, 1977).

There is a body of work which indicates that naturalistic approaches to language teaching/learning appear to have value for all adults, especially the nonliterate. Second language learning is viewed as a process of acquiring new habits of aural/oral communication through listening and speaking before beginning to read. As with first language learning, the spoken work is primary, and students must understand, speak, and then later, read and write a second language (Finocchiaro and Bonomo, 1973). This philosophy is consistent with that of McDonough and McDonough (1978) who find that teaching a second language within social contexts, as in the notional-functional approach, teaches communicative competence in ways similar to that of primary language learning.

Real communication and language take place "when the speaker gets the hearer to commit his long muscles in the way the speaker intended," (Stevick, 1976, p. 37). The whole person is involved in the learning process, and this may imitate certain aspects of natural first language learning. Additional research indicates second language learning involving a total physical response (TPR) works well for both children and adults, engaging their long term interest without necessarily relying on the written word. Just as children learn much of their beginning language through directions to "Sit down," or "Drink your milk," suiting the actions to the words, so can adults learn a second language by an approximation of this process (Asher, 1977). This less conventionally academic method appears to have particular value for nonliterate adults (ACSA/ESL, 1981, Note 4).

In writing specifically to the question of adult second language learning, Selman (1979) states that adults must first hear and mimic before speaking; a distortion of natural rhythm may occur if reading begins before the student has acquired a certain level of second language competence. In addition, reliance on written forms will slow the process of active oral production. Although limited research with children indicates oral language does not have to form the basis for reading (Weeks, 1979), the examples given of deaf children and a few special, individual cases, appear to have no implications for adults.

The limited English speaker should read and write patterns which s/he can understand and generate based on this prior listening and speaking practice (Haverson, Note 5). Although reading and writing skills can be taught simultaneously in such an approach, the skills of reaching for real information and writing to communicate cannot be learned until the majority of English patterns have been mastered aurally/orally. Haverson also notes that listening skills are absolutely essential as part of a pre-reading program for nonliterate students.

Research which tends to substantiate this view (Gary, 1978) finds a cognitive advantage in limiting focus to one skill at a time; learning from active listening transfers to language production. Because the decoding process in second language learning requires great effort, particularly for adult learners, there is an affective advantage in initially limiting the demands made upon such students. The importance of affective rather than cognitive factors in second language acquisition is also emphasized by Terrell (1977) who, therefore, believes the major curriculum consideration should be to make the student comfortable and at ease in the classroom.

For adult immigrants with little or no formal education, ESL classes might best be structured so as to resemble the situation of children learning their primary language in the home. Such an approach would emphasize functional interaction, visual and kinesthetic cues, modified teacher/parent speech, and music, rhyme, and rhythm (Bassano, 1979).

When communication is more important than form, it is vital to design at least a majority of classroom activities to elicit real communication (Terrell, 1977). This research concludes that correct grammar will develop with the language experiences of the student, in natural situations, where there is communicative content. The emphasis on meaningful language activities for adult non-English speakers can be developed through the use of experience stories which are recorded on tape or by pictures rather than written words which the student is not yet ready to decode. When literacy skills are sufficiently developed, then students can begin to read and finally write their experiences (Levenson, 1979). Experience stories appear to be a particularly good vehicle for language acquisition by nonliterate students (ACSA/ESL, 1981, Note 4).

Summary

An introductory ESL class for adults illiterate in their own language or unfamiliar with the Latin alphabet must create an atmosphere in which students are comfortable and able to learn oral language necessary for survival and communication in their new country. Acquiring the skills necessary for decoding a new language and a new culture is an arduous task for those suddenly plunged into modern American life. Before the whole

concept and system of reading and writing can be understood, students must develop the ability to hear the sounds of the language, understand words and ideas, and begin to express their own thoughts and ideas in the target language.

Implications for Curriculum

Philosophy

A curriculum separating literacy skills from those of listening and speaking can help to meet the special needs of nonliterate students by providing a classroom environment which may more nearly approximate a naturalistic learning experience. Although many of the refugees speak at least two languages, most of them learned their second language while working on farms, or trading in village markets. For these students, language learning is an aural/oral process. Learning to read and write requires an understanding of a whole new symbolic process; for nonliterate students literacy concepts may be as new as the target language. These students must first understand the sounds of English, then the concepts of sound/symbol correspondence, before they can even begin to actually read and write.

Written language as a reinforcement for language learning is a still more advanced level. When the teacher writes sentences and isolated words and vocabulary items on the board, the beginning students spend an interminably long time drawing symbols which are virtually meaningless to them, rather than truly writing. The students are not yet ready to deal with the new language in both the oral and written forms. Therefore, they are distracted from the fundamental tasks of learning to understand and speak English, and their progress is slower and more painfully frustrating than it needs to be. At a time when they most need to see themselves making progress in learning to communicate in their new country, they often tend to focus on what they are not learning, rather than on their language gains.

A curriculum for nonliterate refugees needs to provide for the development of the same survival and language skills needed by other new immigrants. Separating the curriculum into aural/oral and literacy components offers two major advantages to nonliterate students. First, this organization of material limits the students' focus to only one general area of language learning at a time. Second, the students can proceed more rapidly in learning to understand and speak English; their progress in these areas is not tied to their grasping the concepts and mechanics of literacy. Their progress in oral communication is not impeded by their inexperience in reading and writing.

For teachers, this separation emphasizes both the practical and the philosophical departure from more conventional

approaches. Pictures, realia, mime, and all sorts of audio-visual techniques and materials form the basis of the curriculum. Students are cued to vocabulary and structure practice not by written examples, but by oral directions, pictures, gestures, and sounds. The practice pattern is heard and spoken, not read. When students work in pairs or small groups, they are not cued by exercises in the book. They must form both questions and answers based on previous practice and the immediate stimulation of objects, pictures, and situations.

The teacher's focus is also limited to either literacy or oral skills at any given time. This constant reminder that writing does not reinforce speaking for nonliterate students may serve to continually underscore the special learning situation of these particular students. Books tend to demand of us that we follow and finish them; without books or basal texts, the curriculum should more readily respond to the actual survival needs of the students.

Clearly, an entirely aural/oral curriculum, with a separate literacy program, for nonliterate students will differ more in the choice and emphasis of certain techniques and attitudes, than in the basic content and overall structure of the course. All ESL students need to be able to use the verb to be and correctly fill out the various forms, registrations, and questionnaires of bureaucracy. Literate or nonliterate beginning students must be able to give their names and addresses, greet people, and deal with problems of food, health, and shelter. For the nonliterate student, both affective and cognitive advantages will accrue when oral and literacy skills are allowed to develop at different rates, independently of each other.

This aural/oral curriculum for nonliterate refugees should:

1) Concentrate on helping students learn vocabulary and structures necessary for survival.

2) Evolve in a naturalistic manner, using concrete objects and realistic representations as much as possible.

3) Rely on strategies which emphasize useful and empowering language, rather than explanations: how, not why.

4) Include physical response whenever appropriate.

5) Respond to both the life needs as well as the learning styles of the students.

Methods and techniques

Although the best ESL approach for nonliterate students appears to be a naturalistic one, obviously the classroom is not the reality of life. In a roomful of adults, the natural situations of first language learning will not spontaneously develop. The teacher must begin by structuring the language and simulated experiences in some logical progression in order to further the students' learning the target language. Some overall framework is required if the students are to learn the language and begin to deal with their world in English.

A naturalistic approach argues for the introduction of various forms, tenses, etc. as the language situation requires. Nevertheless, if the class work is to provide sufficient opportunities for the students to learn vocabulary and structure, then the organization of the material must provide for repeated practice and review. Therefore, an outline of the structures, patterns, and vocabulary to be presented is necessary.

This outline might well be based on the books used in the school's higher level classes; students will then be ready to eventually read and write language already familiar to them. The curriculum outline in Finocchiaro's Teaching English as a Second Language (1969, pp. 66-82) might also prove valuable. A different, but equally useful model could be drawn from Everyday English (Schurer, 1979). However, a teacher's own experience and personal teaching style should dictate the choice of format, whether original or patterned after other materials.

Beginning vocabulary needs to provide for tangible objects that can be manipulated, given to, taken from, put on, put under, etc. For people living in a new country, vocabularies of foods and parts of the body are good starting points. Refugees unable to read signs and use dictionaries need to begin with items from their everyday lives. Questions of how many and how much logically belong with the language of the supermarket, too.

The need for survival skills mandates certain items in the curriculum that pose particular problems for those refugees who have rarely used money as a medium of exchange, and whose arithmetic skills are negligible. These students must learn to count as well as recognize numbers in order to buy food, give their address to the social worker, take the correct bus, call their friends, or arrange an appointment with the doctor. Therefore, numbers, dates, and addresses must also be included at this time.

Students need to understand and respond to questions about their first and last names, as well as orally spell personal and street names in order to carry out even the most elementary tasks of registering in school or renting an apart-

ment.

Dialogues and drills incorporating physical response can be developed around these language situations. Those students too shy to respond to questions, or even repeat English words, can demonstrate their understanding by putting two apples on the table, or taking the correct change in a simulated marketing experience. Not only will this help the students ultimately generate language, but should also serve to help students develop a positive image of their own abilities to function in this language and culture.

At more advanced stages of introductory classes, students are able to talk about their own lives, and develop experience stories which can become the basis for their reading and writing activities. The preliterate refugees have all participated in farming activities. A picture story showing the process of preparing the soil, planting the seeds, watering, weeding, etc. can be the vehicle for teaching basic words necessary for farming. A film or series of pictures showing rice cultivation can give further practice in the use of these terms. Next, the students can tell the teacher about how they planted rice, which tools they used. etc.

Students might draw pictures to illustrate the process; these pictures can become the source for future discussion and review of the structures and vocabulary learned. Students will not only be learning words needed in possible jobs in America, but, by discussing their own life experiences and consciously educating the teacher, they may well be enhancing their own feelings of achievement. Certainly the emotional tie to the English words should be an affective advantage in the students' learning them.

As foods and body parts are reintroduced, students should be encouraged to discuss their own experiences with stores and doctors, cooking and medicines. Only through this kind of exchange can the teacher know about the cultural and language problems with which the students are struggling. The curriculum must then stretch to meet these needs by giving students enabling and empowering language that can help them deal with their difficulties.

Jazz chants (Graham, 1978) and total physical response routines, both teacher-made and those of Romijin and Seely (1979) can be used from the beginning of the program to teach language in natural contexts in related series. Although the initial presentation of first and last name questions may be simple and direct, a review using "Tell Me Your Name" (Graham, 1978, p. 45) gives students the natural flow and progression of such questions, as well as teaches other questions often asked at the same time.

Conclusion

By structuring the introductory ESL program into separate components, the school can permit the students' verbal abilities to grow with their life experiences, unhindered by the slower development of literacy skills. Students will find themselves better able to function independently, asserting a measure of control in their own lives. This resumption of adult roles should help to lessen some of the feelings of loss and depression, and strengthen their sense of well-being.

The separation of the teaching of literacy skills from aural/oral skills would seem to offer the possibility of providing a better affective environment, while, at the same time, encouraging and nurturing more rapid language learning.

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